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Summerstart advisors: Credit Load Assessment

Western Washington University. Office of Survey Research

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**Western Washington University
Office of Survey Research**

**CREDIT LOAD ASSESSMENT
Responses of Summerstart Advisors to Student Focus Groups**

Methodology

In Spring 2008 The Office of Survey Research informed former Summerstart Advisors that we had conducted focus groups with freshmen during Winter Quarter to find out why students are not registering for full course loads during their first quarter and first year at Western. As a part of this project, we sent Summerstart advisors a questionnaire which asked them to comment on students' comments and to provide a context for understanding why not all students take a full 15 credit load in their first quarter. We asked advisors to provide detailed comments about why they think students perceive the process the way they do and what happens during these advising sessions that might be leaving students with these impressions. In addition, we asked advisors to give their own insights about how the advising process worked last summer in ways that both encouraged and inhibited the likelihood that students would take at least 15 credits.

We designed two versions of the questionnaire in order to keep it reasonably short, and to obtain a good response rate. A total of 18 Summerstart advisors were asked to participate, and 15 responded. Seven advisors responded to Version A (two social sciences, one humanities, one education, one music, and two for undecided students). Eight advisors responded to Version B (two business, two math/science, one environmental studies, one pre-health, one for undecided students, and one Student Outreach Services advisor).

Findings

Summaries of findings are attached.

**Western Washington University
Office of Survey Research**

**CREDIT LOAD ASSESSMENT
Responses of Summerstart Advisors to Student Focus Groups
Version A**

Seven Summerstart advisors responded to Version A:

- a. Social Sciences
- b. Social Sciences
- c. Music
- d. Undecided
- e. Education
- f. Humanities
- g. Undecided

1. Some students said that they were advised to take between 12 and 15 credits but were not encouraged to take a full load and, in some cases, were discouraged from doing so. Many said they received comments like “stick with 13, you don’t need more”, “14 is a good load”; or “good enough”.

Did this happen in your advising session? Can you provide any context for when and why such comments may have been made to students?

Advisors list several reasons why they might say to a student that it is okay to start with a 13 or 14 credit schedule.

1. Many students come to the Summerstart session with a schedule already developed (thus the credit load is already decided). If a student has a 13-14 credit schedule with four courses, advisors would not encourage the student to drop one in favor of a higher credit course in order to hit the magic 15. On the other hand, if a student had 13 credits with three courses, an advisor would encourage this student to rethink the courses in order to increase the credits. However some students will not be convinced to change their schedules, having already developed their schedules in advance with parents or other students.
2. It is difficult to craft a schedule with exactly 15 credits. If the student has already registered for 13-14 credits the advisor may tell the student it is okay start with this schedule.

3. Advisors recommend that students find a 1 or 2 credit PE class to round out their numbers, but these classes fill up fast (they are scarce). "Students can't always find one that fits their schedule and interests."
4. If a student's background is not very strong, or if they are registering for classes that are particularly rigorous in conjunction with each other, then advisors may tell students it's okay to start with a 12-13 credit schedule. "There seem to be a lot of class/credit combos that are rigorous, but total under 15 credits." For example: Math 114 (5), Chemistry 121 (5) and Philosophy 112 (3) add up to 13 credits total. Several other rigorous schedules are listed below; each totaling fewer than 15 credits (see d below). One advisor has heard many times that certain courses should be 5 credits (rather than 3 or 4) because there is such a large workload—for example Philosophy, English and History. Another advisor says that some students would have a hefty load with three 4-credit classes; and at other times students tell advisors that they are not confident taking more than 12 or 13 credits for a number of reasons. In these scenarios advisors would be reluctant to advise a student to add another course. "We could not advise them to take more credits if it would be a detriment to them."
5. Many students plan on being involved with extracurricular activities (athletics, working part time, clubs and activities, etc.) These outside involvements may take considerable commitment, so an advisor would not want to encourage students to get in over their heads as they are adjusting to the rigor of college coursework.
6. The first quarter away from home is a difficult time of adjustment and campus acclimation for a large percentage of our students. Taking twelve or thirteen credits the first quarter fulfills full time status requirements and facilitates the acclimation to campus many have trouble with.
7. For certain majors such as Music, schedules may add up to fewer than 15 credits because of the nature of the program. For example, Vocalists will register for 14 credits in their first quarter and they are not advised to add an additional course to their full load.

Advisors comments are provided verbatim:

- a. *If a student had a schedule of courses that they wanted to take that totaled 14 credits for 4 courses I wouldn't have encouraged them to drop one in favor of a higher-credit course in order to hit the magic 15. At 13 for three courses I would probably encourage them to rethink the courses in order to increase the credits. Many wanted a 1 or 2 credit physical education course to round out their numbers but those classes were scarce.*

- b. *It is difficult to craft a schedule with exactly 15 credits. If a student has registered for 14 credits, I usually tell them to stop at that point, unless they can find a PE class for one credit. Adding a 3 credit class would bring them to 17 credits, which I think is too much for most freshmen. If the student has 13 credits, I make a judgment call about whether to advise them to register for another class. If their background is not very strong, or if they are registered for particularly challenging classes, then I do sometimes tell them that it's OK to start with a 13 credit schedule. I do strongly encourage everyone to get into a 1 credit PE class to boost their credits a little, and also because I think exercise is really good for everyone! But those PE classes fill up fast, so students can't always find one that fits their schedule and interests.*
- c. *Freshmen music students, minors and pre-majors, register for fall courses as follows:*
Vocalists - 14 credits in music courses.
Instrumentalists - 11 credits in music courses plus a 4-5 credit GUR.
Required music course enrollment is guaranteed.
Vocalists are advised not to add another course to their fall load.
Instrumentalists are advised to register for their English or Math requirement, increasing their credit total to 15-16 credits. If they transfer ENG and MATH credits then they are advised to register for a Lab Science.
- d. *This might have happened in my advising session. There are some combinations that are particularly tough in conjunction with each other – For example: Math 114 (5), Chemistry 121 (5) and Philosophy 112 (3), in this scenario – I would be reluctant to have a student add another course – those are three very difficult course and adding a 4th may be too much for a first quarter frosh to handle. English 101 (4); History 104 (4) and Math 118 (5) would also be a pretty full load for a first quarter frosh (that's only 13 credits!) I've heard many times that the Philosophy classes should be 5 credits because there is such a large workload – same thing with English and history. I work with the 13%(ish) freshmen on academic warning after their first quarter in college – having them potentially struggle though even more credits their first quarter would take them that much longer to pull themselves out of the hole they dig themselves into, and at WWU – with SO many majors with elevated standards, that might really create problems for our students to pursue their academic interests. Also, we have many students who are planning on being involved with extracurricular activities (athletics, working part time, clubs and activities, etc.) These outside involvements may take considerable commitment, and I don't want to encourage students to get in over their heads as they are adjusting to the rigor of college coursework. Other examples of rigorous schedules that wouldn't bring a student to 15 credits:*
Economics 206 (4), Math 112 (5), Spanish 104 (5)
Math 114 (5), English 214 (5), Geology 101 (4)
Liberal Studies 271 (4), Spanish 104 (5), Philosophy 114 (3)
Theatre 201 (3), Environmental Studies 202 (3), History 112 (4), English 101 (4)
- e. *Yes. That is excellent advice for our freshmen learners. The first quarter away from home is a difficult time of adjustment and campus acclimation for a large percentage of our students. Taking twelve or thirteen credits the first quarter fulfills full time status requirements and*

facilitates the acclimation to campus many have trouble with. The two or three credits difference between credits can easily be made up during winter or spring quarter (or over the four years of enrollment at WWU) and still permit graduation on schedule.

- f. It seemed to me that students had already talked to other students or to their parents about how many credits they planned to take. In other words, they came into the advising session already decided on the number and were not convinced otherwise during the session.*
 - g. We strongly encouraged all new freshmen to take 15 credits. We would tell them that this was the best way to graduate "on time" and stay on track. However, some students would have hefty loads with three 4-credit classes. We could not advise them to take more credits if it would be a detriment to them. At other times, students would tell us that they were not confident taking more than 12 or 13 for a number of reasons. Unfortunately, there seem to be a lot of class/credit combos that are rigorous, but total under 15 credits.*
2. Many students noted that it was difficult to put together a schedule of 15 or more credits because of the variable credit value that Western attaches to courses.

Did you find this to be the case? Did this happen a lot in your advising sessions? What do you think could be done to resolve this – either in terms of the credit-course system at Western, the registration process, or the way that registration is handled during Summerstart?

Advisors agree that it is difficult for the majority of students to put together a schedule of 15 credits (not for Music majors, after their first quarter).

- 1. First quarter students will often put together a twelve or thirteen credit schedule of GUR classes. If they were to add another 4 or 5 credit course, it would put them at 16-18 credits—"far too heavy an academic load for a young student's first quarter on our campus."
- 2. Several of the first year classes are 4 credits, such as English 101, Chem 101 and Bio 101. These are challenging classes so advisors would discourage students who are taking English 101 and Chem 101 to take more than 15 credits.

As for the credit-course system at Western, the following are offered as solutions:

- 1. If Western would offer almost all of its courses at 5 credits – we wouldn't have this problem. Students would take three classes a quarter (with few exceptions) and that would help them meet 45 credits per year and graduation in four years (given adequate progress.)

2. Offer a greater number of three credit GUR classes, or to make registration for low credit courses across a variety of departments available. A separate listing of such “filler” courses would also be helpful.

Comments are provided verbatim:

- a. *It happened often enough. As I recall, I more often had to caution students who wanted to overload than to encourage students to carry a full load. On both ends it was difficult to hit the target numbers. The credit-course system no doubt has some anomalies (high work load for few credits; high credits for too little effort) but in the main it seems like credits are a reasonable indication of work load. I don't have a solution to the problem of hitting the proper mix of 2,3,4 and 5 credit courses.*
- b. *Yes, this is a problem. I think the vast majority of students are not able to sign up for exactly 15 credits, even if they want to. A lot of the first year classes are 4 credits, such as English 101, Chem 101 and Bio 101. It's hard to get a schedule to add up to 15 when a student takes 2 4-credit classes. Also, I know these are challenging classes so I discourage students who are taking English 101 and Chem 101 to take a load that is bigger than 15 credits.
I think it might make sense to move some of the first year classes to 5 credits, including English 101 and the lab sciences. I don't know what the impact would be on the departments that teach these classes, however.*
- c. *Not for music students - they are advised from the outset that if they want to graduate in four years then they need to register in 15-17 credits per quarter (after fall quarter, for every quarter until their third year, they are advised to register for 2 GURs per quarter in addition to their 7-10 credits in music).*
- d. *Absolutely it can be difficult to find an even 15 credit course load (see my notes from #1) I don't believe the registration system at Summerstart is to blame. If Western would offer almost all of its courses at 5 credits – we wouldn't have this problem. Students would take three classes a quarter (with few exceptions) and that would help them meet 45 credits per year and graduation in four years (given adequate progress.)*
- e. *Absolutely! Often the first quarter freshman will be able to find twelve or thirteen credits of GUR classes, but then must take, because of the limited GUR offerings, another four or five credit course to complete the recommended “15 credit” schedule. Doing so then puts them at 16-18 credits ... far too heavy an academic load for a young student's first quarter on our campus.
One solution would be to offer a greater number of three credit GUR classes, or to make registration for low credit courses across a variety of departments available. A separate listing of such “filler” courses would also be helpful.*
- f. *Initially the students had trouble with the variable credit value, but they seemed to understand it eventually.*

- g. The 4-credit classes pose a difficulty for students and advisors!*
3. A number of students said that they ended up with fewer than 15 credits because the registration process at Summerstart was so overwhelming and too many of the courses they wanted were filled.

Did you observe this in your sessions? Do you think that the planned expansion of Summerstart to two days will resolve this problem? Why? Why not? What other steps could be taken to resolve this problem?

Advisors agree that that registration process during Summerstart is overwhelming. For one thing, students may not really be able to absorb the Powerpoint presentation. Also it is difficult to find open sections, particularly in Spanish, English and Math, and it is difficult to find 1-2 credit options to fill in a schedule. One advisor points out, however, that “too many of the courses they wanted were filled” often means that the specific sections/times students desired were filled. “I heard again and again that they wanted their first class about 10 am.”

Advisors believe that the revised Summerstart schedule for this summer will help with decision-making as well as the time problem. However, one advisor says that not enough options are available to enroll in low credit courses of interest or need to the freshman. “We should consider offering a wide variety of two and three credit courses for freshmen to assist them with campus acclimation and/or introduce them to the various disciplines or departments across our campus. Such courses would serve as advisement, recruitment and mentoring opportunities.”

- a. I do, indeed, think many were overwhelmed and rushed during registration and I sincerely hope that having an evening to study the course offerings and consider a balanced load will improve that experience. Talking to advisees about Summerstart in subsequent quarters was eye-opening as to how unclear many of them were – they really had not absorbed the Powerpoint given directly before they went live... “Too many of the courses they wanted were filled” often meant that the specific sections/times they desired were filled. I heard again and again that they wanted their first class about 10 am....As mentioned above, there were few 2 credit options to fill a schedule.*
- b. It might help the overwhelming part, but it won't help the difficulty of finding open sections. Although I think that this year was probably the best one so far in terms of students being able to find open sections. I didn't encounter that many problems. The biggest problem of all was the language classes, particularly Spanish. There is clearly a need to open additional sections of Spanish. The department needs to hire another Spanish instructor. I've heard from people in the department that the wait list for Spanish 101 is usually longer than the enrollment of the class itself, so there is clearly enough interest for an additional section.*

- c. *Often ENG 101 sections are filled, or a specific MATH requirement, but we have no difficulty finding other GURs to fill their schedule.*
 - d. *It is overwhelming. Hopefully changing Summerstart to a two day program will allow students to do the research and think about what they want to take their first quarter in college. I fully believe the registration process will be less overwhelming for students this summer because they have an afternoon and evening to do their "homework" of looking through the Degree Planning Guide, major guides and looking through Classfinder to see what is being offered this fall. Then they will be able to bring in their ideas to registration the morning of day two of Summerstart and be able to register for courses having more thought put into their choice of courses. (Again, having all of the courses offered at 5 credits would also alleviate this problem of getting to 15 credits with the combinations of classes and credits.*
 - e. *Yes. No. Because not enough options are available for the learners to enroll in low credit courses of interest or need to the freshman. We should consider offering a wide variety of two and three credit courses for freshmen to assist them with campus acclimation and/or introduce them to the various disciplines or departments across our campus. Such courses would serve as advisement, recruitment and mentoring opportunities.*
 - f. *I found this to be the case due to the short amount of time we had in each session that was dedicated to registration. I think the revised schedule for this summer should help with the time problem.*
 - g. *Students will face full classes every quarter, certainly more so than at Summerstart. In the "Undecided" groups, the AAC advisors stay with the students until they have a full load of classes. It would be rare for a student to leave our sessions without doing so. Hopefully, now that we have gone to a two-day Summerstart, this will help these type of students.*
4. Another reason mentioned for not taking a full load, especially by those with lower academic skills, was a lack of confidence in ability to be successful their first quarter.

Did you see this expressed much in your sessions? Did you think students were making honest assessments of themselves? How would you have advised a student who expressed a low level of confidence and had test scores or grades that supported such an assessment? What if they had high scores and grades and said they lacked the confidence?

For students with low test scores and low confidence level:

1. Direct students into courses where they are likely to get personal attention such as a FIGS cluster or a FYE seminar.
2. Suggest that students get involved with study groups for each course
3. Work with the student to find out their strengths and interests – and try to help match those to the courses they would take

4. Find smaller classes for that student to take – vs. the big lecture courses so they might feel more comfortable in the environment and less like to avoid the class (skipping it if they fall behind)
5. Suggest that the student take a lighter load
6. Suggest that the student enroll in remedial courses if necessary
7. Introduce the student to our various tutorial centers and other resources
8. Suggest taking courses that might provide opportunities to improve self-esteem or self-analysis capabilities

For students with high scores and low confidence:

1. Assure students that their accomplishments indicate that they are capable of taking the indicated course levels. Tell them that ability is rarely the stumbling block in college, but time management is crucial. If they are really reluctant to jump in at the level indicated, I suggest that they defer for a quarter and take other GERs of interest.
2. Try to find courses that match strengths and interests
3. Suggest that they challenge themselves and advise them of the drop/add options available to our students.

One advisor suggests that across the board – students are nervous and not sure how much would be too much to take on during their first quarter. “Three classes vs. four might be a huge task for students to feel comfortable undertaking if they are already nervous about their academic skills and abilities.” Another advisor thinks the parents have more influence over the course load than the advisors.

- a. *I would direct students with low scores and low confidence into courses that where they are more likely to get personal attention such as a FIGS cluster or a FYE seminar. I would also recommend to them GER courses that I know to be well received by students and I would heartily suggest that they get involved with study groups for each course.*

For students with high scores and low confidence I would assure them that their accomplishments indicate that they are capable of taking the indicated course levels (in math, for example) based on the department’s long experience with incoming students. I generally tell all the low confidence students that ability is rarely the stumbling block in college but time management is crucial. If they are really reluctant to jump in at the level indicated, I suggest that they defer for a quarter and take other GERs of interest.

- b. *I suppose this is a concern for some students, but my experience suggests that students tend to be over confident, not under confident. Also, many don’t understand how much work an 18 credit load is going to be, or why it might not be a good idea to take English 101, Bio 101, and Math 112 in their first quarter (plus an additional 3 credit class on top because the first three only add up to 13 credits!)*

- c. *Not the case with music students.*
 - d. *Western doesn't admit that many students who are coming in with lower academic skills than their peers. Across the board – students are nervous and not sure how much would be too much to take on during their first quarter. Three classes vs. four might be a huge task for students to feel comfortable undertaking if they are already nervous about their academic skills and abilities. I would agree that the minority of students coming in with “lower” academic skills are more nervous and more reluctant to take a full load. I might work with a student to find out their strengths and interests – and try to help match those to the course they would take. I'd also work to find smaller classes for that student to take – vs. the big lecture courses so they might feel more comfortable in the environment and less like to avoid the class (skipping it if they fall behind.) If they had high scores and said they lacked confidence – I would probably do the same for those students – really try to find courses that match strengths and interests.*
 - e. *No. If such low self-assessment and low entrance exam scores were expressed I would suggest they take a lighter load, enroll in remedial courses if necessary, and introduce the student to our various tutorial centers. I would suggest taking courses that might provide opportunities to improve their self-esteem or self-analysis capabilities. If high scores were indicated, I would suggest they challenge themselves and advise them of the drop/add options available to our students.*
 - f. *Once again, I think the parents had more influence over the course load than the advisors did. I encouraged all the students to take a full load.*
 - g. *I saw a little bit of this. We tell students that college is an adjustment for all students. However, if they have been admitted it is because they are at a level to succeed at WWU. I also remind them of all of WWU's resources to help them.*
5. Students who transferred in credits often said that they didn't see those credits as getting a head start towards graduating early. Most took AP and other college credit classes because they sounded more interesting than other options they had in high school and some took them because they wanted to get better prepared for college. Most saw these credits as a “cushion” that allowed them to take fewer credits in the Fall and during their first year.

Did you hear similar comments in your sessions? How did you advise these students?

Four of seven advisors did not hear such comments during their sessions. One advisor has heard students say that they thought such courses would allow them to begin their major or graduate early. Another has heard students say “I got a head start so I can have an easy quarter.” Another has heard on occasion that students just want 12 or 13 credits their first quarter and feel okay with that because they did bring in college credits. “Ultimately it is up to the student.”

Students with transfer credits are generally advised to take the same number of credits as everyone else—15 credits being the goal. However, one advisor finds that “students who register for less than 15 credits do so against our advice.” Another advisor finds that the majority of students who take fewer than 15 credits their first quarter do so because they are not able to find a good combination of classes that brings them to 15 credits.

- a. *I didn't hear the transfer credits referred to in that way. I suspect they had a lot more time for this kind of talk during the focus groups than we had in the advising sessions! If I had I would have encouraged them to think of them incorporated into their college degree; they would have the advantage of finishing their GERs and declaring a major earlier. Depending on major, these credits could be a hedge against a 5th year in college.*
- b. *I don't recall hearing students say that they would take fewer credits in the fall because they had AP or transfer credits. But it's true that having a few credits transferred from AP will not allow students to graduate early. I advise students with transfer credits to take the same number of credits as everyone else.*
- c. *No - music students with transfer credits from AP or Running Start were very aware those credits helped, but also aware they still needed to register for a full load of at least 15 credits/quarter. Students who register for less than 15 credits do so against our advice. We have always been able to find a course that works for their music schedule, but some due to lack of interest perform at a far lower academic level in their non music schedule.*
- d. *It is my experience that the majority of students who take fewer than 15 credits their first quarter do so because they are not able to find a good combination of classes that brings them to 15 credits. I do hear, on occasion, the students that just want 12 or 13 credits their first quarter and feel okay with that because they did bring in college credit – but not nearly as many as those that just can't get to a realistic 15 credits given the combination of courses and workloads. I try to give students the benefits of taking additional classes. But ultimately it is up to the student – and don't feel it is my right/responsibility to push them into taking more credits than they want. I might suggest they sign up for more and let them know there will be time to drop the course with no penalty if they feel it will be too much.*
- e. *No. Most comments I heard indicated that they thought such courses would allow them to begin their major or graduate early. I would acknowledge their previous studies, but caution them that university courses will be considerably more challenging.*
- f. *I did hear similar comments in my sessions. Once again, I advised students to take a full load.*
- g. *I did hear this a lot. If I noticed a student with say, 11-14 credits and told them the goal is 15, some would say, “Yeah, but I got a head start so I can have an easy quarter.” I would remind them that they need to make progress towards their major. And, unless they are certain about their major, that “head-start” can be gone within a few quarters.*

6. **Finally, what other issues did you see arising during your Summerstart advising sessions that could account for the lower than expected credit loads among incoming Freshmen? What do you think can be done (either in terms of the structure of credits attached to courses at the University, the way that Summerstart is organized, or the way that we advise students) in order to increase the credit load of first quarter students? Or do you think nothing should be done? If the latter, could you explain?**

In sum, advisors suggest the following:

1. We will do a better job of advising with the new Summerstart organization. We'll be able to better inform students about their registration options and the importance of registering for 15 credits minimum. Students will also have more time to study their options. *"Send them out the door with worksheets at the first meeting and clear instructions about how to proceed."*
2. Change the credit load for certain first-year courses to 5 credits. *"The current structure really works against us right now because some three and four credits classes feel like five credit courses in terms of workloads. This puts us advisors in a tight spot – because we want to help the student create a "doable" schedule their first quarter – yet the university wants us to get them into 15 credits. These don't always mesh."*
3. Make sure that the ASAs encourage students to register for 15 credits. *"I've heard comments like this a lot from ASAs: 'Oh, it's good to take 13 credits, everybody does in their first year'."*
4. Move more GURs into later time blocks to encourage higher enrollment. *"Students try to avoid early morning (8-10 am) classes."*
5. Examine course availability. *"I think the biggest issue for me was the fact that many students left the advising session without their schedule finalized due to lack of availability of classes and/or their indecision about which classes they wanted to take."*
6. Work on getting buy-in from students as well as parents. *"There was a lot of apathy towards taking a higher load, no matter how much we tried to convince them. Some would say that their parents did not want them to take too much or be overloaded."* One advisor suggests encouraging parents to ask their student if they are registered for a minimum 15 credits/quarter.
7. Inform students that they can drop a course if they find a 15-17 credit overwhelming during their first week of classes.
8. Reiterate that the cost of education increases every year, thus the fifth year student will be paying, on average, a significantly higher percentage in fees than they paid as a freshman.
9. Offer courses that would facilitate adjusting to university life and familiarizing/advising the freshman student with the various academic options available to them.

10. The easiest option would be to simply not worry about the number of credits taken by freshmen during their first quarter. "If we wish their academic career at Western to be successful, then we may need to actually encourage them to take a lighter than normal academic load the first quarter and concentrate on becoming fully acclimated to the campus and coursework expectations at the university."

Again, responses are provided verbatim:

- a. *I'm frankly surprised at the lower than expected credit loads. I'm curious if this is a new trend or if it has been happening for some time? I'd also like to know if incoming freshmen are working more than in previous years – did time restraints come up in the focus groups? I seem to encounter more working freshmen than I did five years ago.*

In general I think we will just do a better job of advising with the new organization. If we send them out the door with worksheets at the first meeting and clear instructions about how to proceed we should have a less stressed and confused group on the following day. That alone will make for better advising for those who truly need more personal attention.

- b. *I think the problem is that the advisers are using pedagogy to inform their decisions, and the people who want freshmen to register for more credits are using money to inform their decisions. These two goals don't necessarily have to be opposed.*

I think the best way to solve this problem is to raise the credit load of some of the first year classes. Those really tough science classes should be 5 credits, as should English 101.

Oh, another potential solution is to make sure that the ASAs encourage students to register for 15 credits. A lot of them do not take 15 credits themselves, or didn't take 15 credits in their first year, so they feel very comfortable advising students to register for fewer credits. I've heard comments like this a lot from ASAs, "Oh, it's good to take 13 credits, everybody does in their first year."

- c. *Because my experience is limited to music students I can't be very helpful here...12 credits equates to three classes, sometimes four. Students try to avoid early morning (8-10 am) classes - perhaps moving more GURs into later time blocks would encourage some higher enrollment.*

Perhaps parents could also be encouraged to ask their student if they are registered for a minimum 15 credits/quarter.

Maybe if students are made more aware that if they find a 15-17 credit overwhelming during their first week of classes that they then can drop a course, perhaps those who are a bit gun shy may be more willing to register for a heavier load. I'm not sure students always understand the Drop/Add options during Summerstart.

There are also students who intend to graduate in five years from the outset, either because they have to work half time (or even more sometimes), or because they are more interested (and have the necessary financial support) in scheduling 'recreational' activities. That's a tough demographic to convince to register for more than the minimum f/t credit load.

Also, students who have a healthy respect for money take a full load because they don't want to burden their parents any more than they must - especially if they have younger siblings to

follow. Perhaps reiterating the cost of their education, and the fact those costs increase every year, thus the fifth year student will be paying, on average, a significantly higher percentage in fees than they paid as a freshman.

I do believe that the longer Summerstart sessions will also better inform students about their registration options and the importance for them to register for 15 credits minimum.

- d. *I would like to reiterate that registration would be MUCH easier if almost all of our courses were offered for five credits each. The current structure really works against us right now because some three and four credits classes feel like five credit courses in terms of workloads – this puts us advisors in a tight spot – because we want to help the student create a “doable” schedule their first quarter – yet the university wants us to get them into 15 credits – these don’t always mesh very well given the variable credits and workloads for the courses. Also, again, I believe giving the students the opportunity to study their options before they register for courses will also greatly help the registration process for students.*
- e. *The easiest option of course would be to simply not worry about the number of credits taken by freshmen during their first quarter. If we wish their academic career at Western to be successful, then we may need to actually encourage them to take a lighter than normal academic load the first quarter and concentrate on becoming fully acclimated to the campus and coursework expectations at the university level.*
I don’t think changes in the Summerstart procedures will impact this phenomenon to any significant degree, but offering more two or three credit course options might. I seriously believe that offering courses that would facilitate adjusting to university life and familiarizing/advising the freshman student with the various academic options available to them would pay great dividends in the future, and would in the long run actually shorten the time required for them to complete graduation requirements. Many learners on our campus seem to me to spend several years kind of wandering in the wilderness before truly figuring out what they need and how to get there. We don’t help them much with that ... but we should. A cost/benefit analysis of this might prove it to be VERY worthwhile!
- f. *I think the biggest issue for me was the fact that many students left the advising session without their schedule finalized due to lack of availability of classes and/or their indecision about which classes they wanted to take. Many of them planned to change their schedules after the advising session. When they do that, there isn’t an advisor there to tell them to take more credits or give them advice about what combination of classes might work best for them.*
- g. *This is a good question. There was a lot of apathy towards taking a higher load, no matter how much we tried to convince them. Some would say that their parents did not want them to take too much or be overloaded. We give this message to parents in our “Tips for Parents” sessions. Students hear this message multiple times at Summerstart. The trouble is that there is not “buy-in” to the idea with all students for some reason. This year at Summerstart, we are going to have a “Large group advising overview” where students will hear the same message. We can include the 15 credit message there.*

**Western Washington University
Office of Survey Research**

**CREDIT LOAD ASSESSMENT
Responses of Summerstart Advisors to Student Focus Groups
Version B**

Eight Summerstart advisors responded to Version B:

- a. Business
- b. Business
- c. Math/Science
- d. Undecided
- e. Pre-Health
- f. Humanities
- g. Math/Science
- h. Student Outreach Services

1. Some students said that they were never told that they needed to take 15 credits each quarter in order to stay on track for graduation in four years, and some were told that it was “normal” to take 5 years to graduate.

Can you recall having told them this during your session? When? Did you emphasize the point strongly? How? Why? Why not? Why do you think they might not recall hearing this message today? Is there a problem with how this expectation is being communicated or with the context of the session itself (anything about the session from time, to social atmosphere, to staffing, to organization, etc.) that leads the students to miss it or discount it?

Advisors do inform students that 15 credits each quarter is an optimal load in order to stay on track for graduation in four years. However students may take fewer than 15 credits for any of the following reasons:

1. They came in with transfer credits so they feel they can take a lighter load;
2. They get overwhelmed with information during Summerstart (they zone out or don't hear the information) so they forget or disregard the advice to take 15 or more credits;
3. They already have a 12 or 13 credit schedule worked out and they are ready to leave the Summerstart session;
4. They have an expectation that college will be hard (so they want to take fewer credits in order to transition);

5. They heard a cautionary message from student peers, parents, siblings, and teachers about their own academic experience which took five years (i.e. the expectation is 5 years)
6. They have heard about the experience of others who failed out.

One advisor suggests that the following should also be considered (see advisor h):

1. Personal experiences and circumstances (e.g. first-generation, first quarter of college, work schedules, family obligations etc.);
2. Test scores in Math. If a student is weak in math they might consider taking a lighter load while taking math or science in order to transition into higher level math

Advisors comments are provided verbatim:

- a. *I go through and “do the math,” 15 credits X 3 qtrs X 4 years =180 credits during each advising session. I qualify the statement by suggesting that while a student may not take 15 credits every quarter, some might be below that number and some above that number during a given quarter. Likely students forget, reconstruct what information was disseminated during Summerstart, and just get overwhelmed with information.*
- b. *At most of my sessions I have pointed out that 15 credits/quarter * 3 quarters/year * 4 years = 180 credits required for graduation. The Powerpoint presentation also mentioned that 15-16 credits was the normally recommended load, even for the first quarter. I do not believe that I or my student advisor ever suggested that it was “normal” to take 5 years.*
Some students may zone out during the presentation; my experience from teaching classes is that any statement I make only once is likely to be caught and retained by fewer than half of the students. (I miss things sometimes when people talk to me!) However, if a student indicates that he/she is ready to leave, and the student has a schedule with only 12 or 13 credits, I normally make some sort of comment, and I think the students typically respond with some statement indicating that they recognize they are “defying” recommendations and are comfortable so doing. If students have heard information contrary to our advice from other sources they trust, I would not be surprised by their discounting of any ideas we present.
- c. *What I try to do during my session is take the time to really emphasize this very point. I take 180 credits/4 years = 45 credits/year. Then divide by 3 quarters per year = 15 credits average to graduate in 4 years. I also tell them some majors are even larger and they must then take more than 15/quarter. I think the students come to our sessions with several expectations (i.e. just when they enter our classes they are not blank slates). What I try to do in my classes is to find out their misconceptions before the classes begin and then tackle them in class one-by-one. Maybe we ought to try to do this for SS. Even if you go over the 15 credits/quarter expectation with them, many students come in with credits and right away they start to do the – well I don’t have to take 15 because I already have X. Most students seem to come with the expectation that college is hard. I try to balance this with yes, but they have done well and 15-16 credits are optimal for*

performance. Many parents seem to have the notion too. The 5 year expectation is something I try to avoid, but sometimes you get pressed, especially by parents. Mostly they say something like— isn't it okay or better to take 5 years and succeed.

Perhaps we could add a slide that shows optimal performance is at 15-16 credits the first quarter.

- d. I can recall telling all students including those with transfer credits that the average credit load to maintain in order to graduate efficiently is 15 credits per quarter. Students might not recall hearing my message or disregard it because they first heard a cautionary message from their student peers, family, siblings, and teachers about their own academic experience which took five years or the experience of others who failed out.*
- e. I always tell them 15 is “normal” and “necessary” to stay on track for graduation in four years.*
- f. I told them to take 15 credits each quarter to stay on track, and if you don't it will likely take 5 years to finish. I clearly remember emphasizing that if you look at college from an economics stand point, you are forced to pay for 18 credits each term, so you are economically advantaged if you take full advantage taking as close to 18 credits each term as possible.
*There was a slide which states 'take 15 credits each term'**
- g. This point did not come up except with students who came in with low math scores and were interested in pursuing science. I advised students who identified themselves as weak at math that if they take math during fall quarter they should consider a lighter load that quarter to help them transition into college level math courses. I did emphasis that a typical load is 14-17 units and for those pursuing science I didn't suggest being at the high end of that range until they are juniors or seniors.*
- h. In advising sessions, I see each student as an individual. I let them know the average credit load is 15 credits or 45 credits per academic year. However, if the student is a first-generation or first-quarter student or both, I tell them to think of their personal experiences and circumstances before making the decision on how many credits they can carry their first quarter. Also, some students have to work in order to be here. Others have families that depend upon them or a combination of these. We also discuss the combination of classes to take that may ensure success. A low GPA in the first quarter takes quite awhile to raise. Many of the students are 'playing it safe'. Usually I see an increase in credit loads after two quarters.*

Depending upon their entry (freshman, sophomore, junior), we discuss how many credits are in a major and about how long it will take them to complete a major. We also discuss the length of time it will take to graduate if they decide on a major in WCE or CST. And, finally, some students need to attend part-time due to their circumstances so we discuss how much longer it will take them to complete their degree.

As far as students missing or discounting the message, perhaps students are not hearing the message because they have too much information flowing into their busy, active minds and lives. We tend to send them information about Western from multiple offices. Also, some of the

students I advise with do not open their mail regularly or check their official Western emails. Many students I meet with are very stressed about a variety of things (finances, family, roommates, making friends, working, etc.). They are sometimes on sensory overload and simply cannot receive the message.

2. Other students said that, even if they could get to at least 15 credits, the small number of credits attached to some of their courses meant that they would have to take too many different courses to get their full credit load. Some, especially those in business, economics and the natural sciences, thought the work load for 3 or 4 credit courses would be similar to the workload for 5 credit courses. They also mentioned that managing and balancing the demands of four or five lower credit load classes would be more difficult than doing so with only three 5-credit classes.

Did you see this as a problem in your advising sessions? What did you advise students about this?

Advisors agree that this is a problem. For example, in the sciences a few of the introductory courses are 4 credit courses yet have a 3-hour lab in addition to the lecture component, which makes scheduling courses more challenging. Also finding 5 desirable classes whose schedules align can be a challenge for some students, moreso than would a schedule of 3 classes. One Summerstart advisor advises students to not take more than 2 science courses at a time and then fill their remaining credit load with general education courses. Another is reluctant to have a first year freshman student take Calculus, Chemistry and 2 more classes. This advisor works hard to get students into a third class that is 4 or 5 credits. If they don't want to take PE for the extra credit, then they will stay at 14. Another advisor tells students that each credit typically requires about 3 hours of time outside the class room in terms of reading, reviewing and exam preparation. However, there is considerable variability in the outside class time. Some classes require less (those 'easy-A classes'), but most require much more time than 3 hours/credit in order to earn an A grade.

Comments are provided verbatim:

- a. *Definitely! And, it makes sense for some students-many of the incoming freshmen, student athletes and students that need to become familiar with the college routine, etc.*
- b. *I do not recall hearing this exact comment. However, students may have been more content to settle for 12 or 13 credits when they were the result of a 4 credit schedule than when 3 classes were involved. Moreover, finding 5 desirable classes whose schedules align can be a challenge for some (picky) students, moreso than would a schedule of 3 classes.*
- c. *Yes, this is a problem. I usually work with Math and Science – which you asked about below. If a student takes Math + Chemistry or Physics, then what happens if they don't take a 5 credit class for their third class? Now that we have made English 101 5 credits, some of this issue will go away. I am reluctant to have a first year freshman student take Calculus, Chemistry and 2 more*

classes! I work hard to get them into a third class that is 4 or 5 credits. If they don't want to take PE for the extra credit, then they will stay at 14. I try and have them avoid a third 3 credit class, but for only the strongest students would I recommend a fourth class. The students come with this expectation and so do many parents. I don't tell students a 3 credit class is the same amount of work as a 5 credit class. I try to explain credits and time outside class – so it would be a counter balance to all I have already said to do so.

- d. Yes. I encouraged them to register for 15 to 17 credits at Summerstart and that they could drop one of the classes later if the workload was too great.*
 - e. Yes, this is a problem.*
 - f. I advised that each credit typically required about 3 hours of time outside the class room in terms of reading, reviewing and exam preparation. However, there is considerable variability in the outside class time. Some classes require less (those 'easy-A classes'), but most require much more time than 3 hours/credit in order to earn an A grade.*
 - g. In the sciences a few of the introductory courses are 4 credit courses yet have a 3-hour lab in addition to the lecture component, which makes scheduling courses more challenging. I did advise students to not take more than 2 science courses at a time and then fill their remaining credit load with general education courses.*
 - h. Students have expressed that some of their lower-credit classes demanded as much work as their five-credit classes. Again, each student approached this challenge in their unique way. Some felt three five-credit classes would allow them to have a better work schedule or to spend more time with their families or to socialize. We often discuss looking at the bigger picture and creating an academic plan of study. Most students agree that this helps to provide a better 'road map' to their choice of classes and helps them to balance their busy schedules.*
3. A number of students took a lighter credit load because they didn't want to be overwhelmed or overloaded in their first quarter, and they wanted to be able to adjust. Some students also wanted to have enough time for the social aspect during their first quarter.

Did you hear such comments during your advising session? Did you ever find yourself telling students something similar? Why? Do you think this is good advice in some instances? When?

The majority of advisors have heard students comment about being overwhelmed. Advisors do not include advice about this during their presentations; however they do think it is good advice when considering personal circumstances such as low AI, low math scores, personal commitments (work, sports), anxiety levels, or the student's concern about balancing academics and social life. One advisor sees more and more concern from

parents—they are either reluctant to overload, or pushing for maximum loads (wanting to pay for only 4 years).

- a. *Again, yes and for many of the incoming freshmen, this is advice that I give them after listening to them during the registration process.*
- b. *I've at least heard the "overwhelmed" comment; I'm not sure they've spoken to me about social activity (I probably appear to be too much of a square to appreciate such a concern). I do not include this advice in the presentation, but I might not argue against it. I'll comment more below, as the next few questions appear related.*
- c. *Yes, I hear this all the time and not just from students. I hear it from their parents too. I see two types of parents – reluctant to overload and pushing for maximum loads (not much in between). More and more the parents only want to pay for 4 years, so I see more concern on their part. I try to tell everyone that an optimal load is 15 – 16 credits. But, if the student is working more than 20 hours per week or have a low AI, we should think carefully about their initial load. I think each case is an individual one.*
- d. *Yes. I don't tell students to do anything. I advise. Yes, I advised students to consider other personal commitments such as playing a sport in the fall quarter. I think it is damn good advice for some students.*
- e. *I always encourage academic progress, if necessary, at the expense of social life, which occurs naturally in any event.*
- f. *NO- I, on advice of the Summerstart training, overemphasized the idea that a full load- 4 classes- is recommended for the first quarter so that the student develops good study habits, a light load will provide too much free time, and allows the student to develop poor study habits. I might have also said I don't fully believe that, but I know I emphasized it because they told us to in the prep.*
- g. *I did hear students indicate they wanted to take a light load their first quarter, and I would never suggest that unless they had low math test scores and wanted to take Math and another science their first quarter.*
- h. *I hear it often. I empathize with students; however, we discuss how well they have done in their previous institution, the combination of classes, whether or not they are working and how many hours. If a student has anxiety and has been referred by the Counseling Center, we may discuss a lighter schedule and combination of classes.*

The number of times a student advising with me mentions how hard it is to meet people or how lonely they feel seems to be increasing. We discuss how often they use screens to communicate or replace the people factor. For example, are they using ipods, computers, TV, text messaging instead of having genuine conversations? Building community wherever we are is

important. If, for one student, it means cutting back on their credit load, I may advise them to do so and to evaluate the outcome and whether or not it needs to continue.

4. A number of students said that they had received advice from others (family, friends, sometimes teachers – especially AP teachers – and sometimes Western advisors) that college was hard and they should take it easy their first quarter and not register for a full credit load.

Did you hear such comments during your advising session? Did you ever find yourself telling students something similar? Why? Do you think this is good advice in some instances? When?

Advisors do hear from students that they believe college will be hard. Advisors agree that this is good advice for some students, considering a number of factors on an individual basis such as employment, extracurricular activities, academic ability, time constraints, personal interests, and variety of course subjects. On the other hand, advisors would not suggest that the average student take a reduced load just because college is hard.

- a. *A qualified yes. For some students, this is good advice. The college experience is more self-driven and more difficult than high school or running start.*
- b. *Yes, I have heard this. Some intercollegiate coaches make such suggestions, and I am inclined to agree with them regarding students with substantial outside obligations. In fact, my student advisors typically mention at an appropriate point in the presentation that the recommendation of 15-16 credits probably should be modified for students with major (say, over 20 hours per week) employment or other extracurricular obligations. I wouldn't suggest, however, that the average student take a reduced load just because college is hard.*
- c. *I try to be careful so my words do not get interpreted as such. College will be harder for some students, but not so for other students. I am not a fan of take it easy as general advice. I tell them I will talk individually about loads and make recommendations. Too much free time seems to be a problem too. I also tell them about financial aid needing 12 credits, so if they have to drop But, I do think this is strongly help misperception.*
- d. *Yes, I heard such comments. Yes, I agreed with the advice from such sources to a certain extent. I told students they should consider a number of different factors when choosing courses such as academic ability, time constraints, personal interests, and variety of course subjects.*
- e. *I hear it, and no, I do not think it is good advice for most students, who are up to the challenge of college-level work.*
- f. *Sure- and yes I did advise this on my personal experience. See #3.*

- g. I didn't hear that mentioned explicitly, but I believe that is true due to the pervasiveness of the perspective described in #3.*
 - h. I have heard this comment many times. Again, each student is unique. Some of the students I advise with are 'withit' enough to take 16-17 credits each quarter. Some need to take less than 15 in order to succeed at their new campus or because they are first-generation students or work or a combination of these. Depending on the individual, it may be in their best interests to start lighter.*
5. Many students (especially those in math, the natural sciences, and health) took fewer than 15 credits because they thought that the courses were going to be particularly difficult and demanding and they wanted to do well in them. They even said that they were advised to take a lighter load or to not exceed 15 credits because they were likely to be challenged by the courses they had selected.

Did you see this happening in your sessions? Did you ever give similar advice to a student? What was the context in which you chose to give that advice (type of student, types of classes registered for, academic interest of student, etc.)

Most advisors say this does happen during their sessions (with a qualified yes). They are supportive of a reduced credit load for some students when considering individual circumstances—such as weak test scores, courses they took in high school, and the student's confidence level if taking courses outside their areas of strength (especially Math, Chemistry, Physics). In some cases a student may take Math as well as Chemistry or Physics so the advisor may try to push 4 or 5 credits as the third class, but the credit load may total 13-14. Also time conflicts and lack of personal interest in available courses may prevent students from registering for additional credits to reach a load of 15. One advisor also believes that it is better to err on the conservative (low credit) side than to do the opposite. "It is always possible to make up credits in later quarters. A D or F grade in the first quarter could do major damage to the GPA."

- a. Another qualified yes. It all depends on the student and their confidence in handling a full load.*
- b. I think that some students who needed (in order to make satisfactory progress toward a major) to take courses that were outside of their areas of strength, especially math, have expressed these ideas. I think this may be a legitimate reason for a student to limit first quarter credits. I do not recall that I have ever made this suggestion without being asked by a student, but I think I may have supported some students who took this view. I am more inclined to support a reduced credit load if the student has weak test scores, and I am conversely quite willing to approve 17 credit schedules for students who have strong scores.*

Some general comments related to #3, #4, and #5: At least last year, I recall my student advisor suggesting to Summerstart students that one advantage of a full schedule was that it typically (if 4 or more courses) afforded them the option to drop a class that proved unexpectedly

difficult or otherwise undesirable and yet retain full-time status. I thought this was a good point...Nevertheless, I think it is likely better to err on the conservative (low credit) side than to do the opposite. It is always possible to make up credits in later quarters, summer included. On the other hand, a D or F grade in one's first quarter could do major damage to the GPA of a student who might eventually decide to apply to graduate schools, and a course with an F (or a D within a major) will need to be repeated anyway, wasting time. I have heard WWU claims that students with heavy course loads perform as well as do students with light loads, but my impression is that the WWU research does not (and, I'm inclined to believe cannot) control for all of the differences across those two populations.

- c. I addressed this somewhat already, but if a Math/Science student is taking Math and Chemistry or Physics, what happens if they do not select a 5 credit class as their third class. I try to push 4 or 5 credits as the third class as much as I can. Sometimes, a student does not want a PE class, so their credit load = 14 – which is fine. The problem comes when a student selects a 3 credit class. If the student is strong, I would ask them to find one more. But, if the MPT is weak, I could not do this. My experience is that Math seems to be a lot more work at WWU than the students are used to doing in high school. Chemistry or Physics can also be challenging. The problem is more with the course credits, not what the students or advisors are doing.*
- d. Yes. Yes, I gave such advice after considering student test scores and the courses they took in high school. Typically, I advise students to take a math, science, and other GUR in such cases. Sometimes students would follow my advice and then look for an additional course but time conflicts and lack of personal interest in available courses prevented them from registering for additional credits.*
- e. Did not happen in my session, and I do not give this sort of advice.*
- f. I gave individual students individual advice based on what I saw of their schedules, and what I know (or perceive to know) about the workload in some classes.*
- g. Yes, as mentioned above. If someone wants to go to professional or graduate school in the sciences or health profession they need to have good grades from the beginning, and for students with marginal science backgrounds I think it is good advice for them to not overload their schedule with science courses. I would say to take less than 15 units, but I would advise them not to take more than 2 sciences at once and if they couldn't make their schedules have 15 credits it is better to error on the low end of the 14-17 credits and have a successful first quarter.*
- h. I do see this happening in my sessions, particularly when students are in the above-mentioned classes. If they are not performing well, C- or lower in some of their major classes, then I suggest that they either lighten their load for a quarter or select a different combination of classes. I also ask them to have a conversation with their instructors and/or the department advisor. Chemistry, Biology, and Engineering Tech are the two areas from which I see particularly stressed students. Some students tell me that in order for the departments to keep their*

accreditation status, they have to assign heavy workloads but lower the curve because they know students cannot possibly integrate and learn all of the information.

6. **Finally, what other issues did you see arising during your Summerstart advising sessions that could account for the lower than expected credit loads among incoming Freshmen? What do you think can be done (either in terms of the structure of credits attached to courses at the University, the way that Summerstart is organized, or the way that we advise students) in order to increase the credit load of first quarter students? Or do you think nothing should be done? If the latter, could you explain?**

In sum, advisors suggest the following:

1. I would prefer to see incoming students error on the side of a lighter credit load the 1st quarter rather than get in over their head and biff the whole process.
2. In my experience, the chief reason for loads below 15 credits has been students' difficulty finding classes that sounded appealing, had seats available, and fit together in a schedule... the relative dearth of 1 and 2 credit classes doesn't help; I try to construct a list of 2-credit classes each year, but some students are not interested in PE/Music/Dance/etc... I'm not sure whether I think major changes should be instituted. For one thing, I wonder whether there are enough open seats (once everyone has registered) that we should really be pushing people to take more than they want, if that is the issue.
3. I am still holding out for a graph that shows the optimal performance at 15 – 16 credits... Changing English 101 to 5 credits will help. Unless more classes are 5 credits or 1 credit, it is hard to see how to balance all the various needs.
4. Require a co-curricular course for all new students. The purpose of the course would be to help students adjust to the university environment (i.e. university policies and student life) as well as learn about the many academic learning opportunities (i.e. academic majors, summer programs, independent learning, and service learning)... Also assign 5 credits to all of the 1-200 level courses. This would allow students to take three courses in order to reach 15 credits as well as simplify their schedule throughout the first year.
5. If students are registering for fewer than 15 credits, I think this is a result of 1) advice they receive, and 2) the plethora of low credit classes the university offers, i.e. 1, 2, and 3 credit classes.
6. I received many comments from students during Fall and Winter quarters that they were failing and needed to drop classes or that they were falling horribly behind in their classes, so I don't know that pushing students to increase their credit load is the answer.
7. I think that advisors need to ask students about their lives. In other words, will you be working? If so, how many hours? Has either of your parents graduated from a university? Are you a student with family responsibilities? Is English your first language?

Again, responses are provided verbatim:

- a. *The “flip side” of the issue is: load ‘em up with 15 or more credits that they can’t handle and watch ‘em flunk or drop a couple courses. The end result is pretty much the same—perhaps worse. I would prefer to see incoming students error on the side of a lighter credit load the 1st quarter rather than get in over their head and biff the whole process. If they are a wiz and a cracker jack, they take 18 credits somewhere along the line once they have built their confidence. If they need an extra quarter to graduate, hey, in the course of a life-time, 90 extra days on a college campus will be appreciated at some time in the future.*

- b. *In my experience, the chief reason for loads below 15 credits has been students’ difficulty finding classes that sounded appealing, had seats available, and fit together in a schedule. Many students were easy to please, but another substantial group was not. I think some of them came in with ideas about what topical areas (or specific courses) they wanted to enroll in. When they found that those courses were filled or did not satisfy GURs, they found many other possibilities undesirable—everything sounded “boring.” Of course, the relative dearth of 1 and 2 credit classes doesn’t help; I try to construct a list of 2-credit classes each year, but some students are not interested in PE/Music/Dance/etc. Not all students are unreasonably picky; sometimes they just have a hard time figuring out how to effectively search for classes or they get unlucky with time conflicts and the like. When we have sessions with 20 students, we are not able to help everybody adequately before lunch, and some students just want to get out of there and go eat. Or they want to check with their parents or look the options over at their leisure and add to their schedule later. Perhaps some of them never do. Lack of the math placement test generates related problems.*

I do not know what the statistics are, so I’m not sure whether I think major changes should be instituted. For one thing, I wonder whether there are enough open seats (once everyone has registered) that we should really be pushing people to take more than they want, if that is the issue. I do think the students should know what they need to achieve to graduate in four years.

And will Summerstart become Springstart next year, or will new students register last? That would seem to be an important factor impacting the set of possible actions.

- c. *Parents seem to have very fixed ideas and it is difficult to convince them of anything otherwise. I am still holding out for a graph that shows the optimal performance at 15 – 16 credits. Also, are students working more than they used to during their Freshman year?*

Is it a mistake to tell them college might be harder than they expect? My experience is that I frame everything in terms of success and go from there.

Changing English 101 to 5 credits will help. Unless more classes are 5 credits or 1 credit, it is hard to see how to balance all the various needs above.

- d. *A required co-curricular course for all new students. The purpose of the course would be to help students adjust to the university environment (i.e. university policies and student life) as well as learn about the many academic learning opportunities (i.e. academic majors, summer programs, independent learning, and service learning). The class would be graded S/U and required that all*

students pass (S/U grading would be a subtle way to decrease the impact of low grades during the first quarter and increase the ability to recover quickly in subsequent quarters).

Also, All of the 1-200 level courses are assigned 5 credits. This would allow students to take three courses in order to reach 15 credits as well as simplify their schedule throughout the first year. The simpler schedule would allow them more time for each class and increase the opportunities for outside collaboration with study groups, professors, and study time in general. Whereas, trying to maintain such a schedule when taking four or five courses becomes exponentially more difficult.

- e. If students are registering for fewer than 15 credits, I think this is a result of 1) advice they receive, and 2) the plethora of low credit classes the university offers, i.e. 1, 2, and 3 credit classes.*
- f. I can tell you my personal hypothesis- and it is not just related to incoming freshmen, but the overall performance of an increasing number of students in my introductory GUR class (EGEO 203) and an increasing number of students in the geography major. Students are increasingly expecting an A for just showing up for a few lectures and the exam. They are attending class much less, and paying attention less in class when they show up.*

What accounts for this??

I don't believe that my teaching abilities have decreased that substantially in the last few years, but the grades in my classes, especially the number of C-D-Fs are substantially (dare I say statistically) increasing. There are still a few stellar students who continue to be stellar in each class/cohort- not sure if that number is decreasing. It could be some type of student preparation issue- I have never assesses incoming skills (does WWU?).

Seems to be a larger number of (at least vocal) students who challenge the course material as irrelevant to their lives and they are only taking the class as requirement- this is a social issue- I can counter with a long list of why the material is relevant to their (long-term) lives, of course most students are not concerned with thinking about why it is important to consider floodplain insurance when they don't even see themselves as homeowners.

I think the biggest issue, and one we as an ENTIRE UNIVERSITY need to take a stand on, is the availability of PowerPoint notes to the student- the downturn in my classes, in terms of attendance, interest and performance is closely tied to the time I started posting my PowerPoint lectures.

1. Doing this discourages attendance ("why show up, I can just read the notes?" No, you still need to read the book (most student tell me they don't buy the book since they can read my notes), and listen to the stuff I lecture about that is not on a PowerPoint)

2. Doing this lowers interest ("this PowerPoint lecture is boring". All the good stuff and stories are off the cuff, not as a graph or outline)

3. Doing this lowers performance ("If I read the notes the night before the exam I'll get an A" No- you need to read the book, hear the lecture, review the notes with the book, then study for consecutive days, then you should be able to earn an A.)

- g. I received many comments from students during Fall and Winter quarters that they were failing and needed to drop classes or that they were falling horribly behind in their classes, so I don't*

know that pushing students to increase their credit load is the answer. I have found that students didn't necessarily pay attention during the Summerstart advising (by their own acknowledgement) because they felt overwhelmed and that what they were hearing wasn't necessarily "for them." Perhaps the amount of material to we expose students to during Summerstart should be reduced to focus more on advising.

- h. I am seeing underprepared students, first generation and low income students, and students who do not know how to fail. I also see some students who seem 'overly' confident about their abilities to succeed in their first year. Some of these students tend to enroll in 15 credits of combinations of classes that may set them up to fail. I think that advisors need to ask students about their lives. In other words, will you be working? If so, how many hours? Has either of your parents graduated from a university? Are you a student with family responsibilities? Is English your first language?*